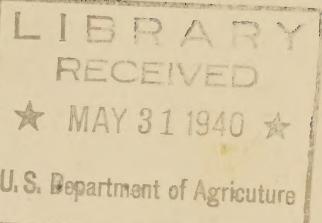


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United States Department of Agriculture
Bureau of Agricultural Economics



A STATEMENT ON RURAL PROBLEM AREAS

by

Carl C. Taylor
Head,
Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare

Presented before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor

Washington, D. C.

May 6, 1940

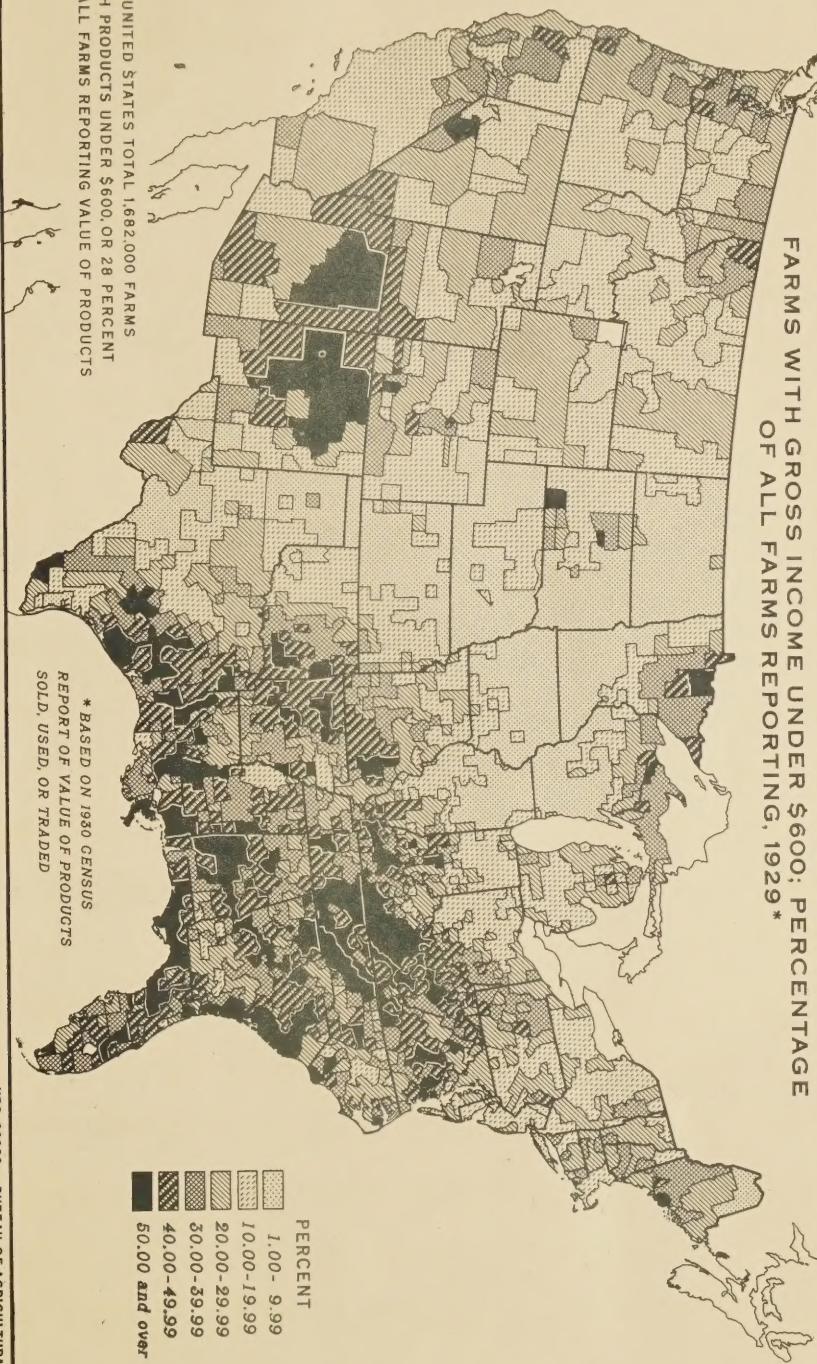
Low Income Farm Families

Low income is the chief conditioning factor operating to reduce farm families to low economic and social status. Income per family, per capita, and per gainfully employed person is generally lower in agriculture than in any other major economic enterprise in the United States.

The data presented in the figures on the next two pages are for 1929, a pre-depression year, and therefore present a picture which is not colored by abnormal conditions. Goods produced for home consumption and traded, as well as those sold for cash, are taken into consideration. Income earned off of the farm is not included, but neither is the fact that income from tenant-operated farms must be divided between two families taken into consideration. Furthermore, the incomes discussed here are gross incomes and therefore include money that must be spent for operating costs, cash rents, and mortgage interest charges. The amount of the farm income left for family living expenses on an average farm with \$600 gross income would undoubtedly be not more than \$300.

The first figure shows the geographical location and concentration of the 1,681,667 farms in the United States that received less than \$600 gross income during 1929. Approximately 7,700,000 persons lived on these farms as members of the operator's household, whose levels of living depend almost altogether upon what they could obtain for \$25 per month per family, for it must be remembered that operating expenses, rents, and interest charges probably consume 50 percent of the \$600 gross farm income.

F FARMS WITH GROSS INCOME UNDER \$600; PERCENTAGE
OF ALL FARMS REPORTING, 1929*



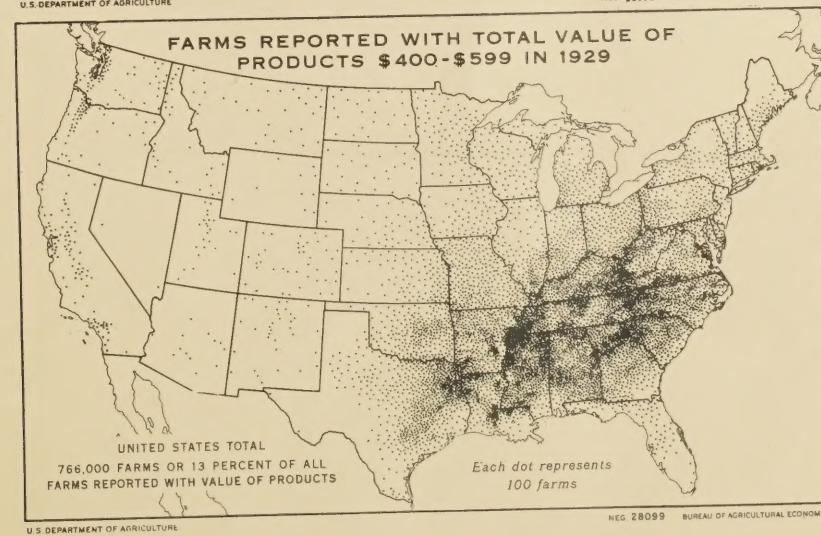
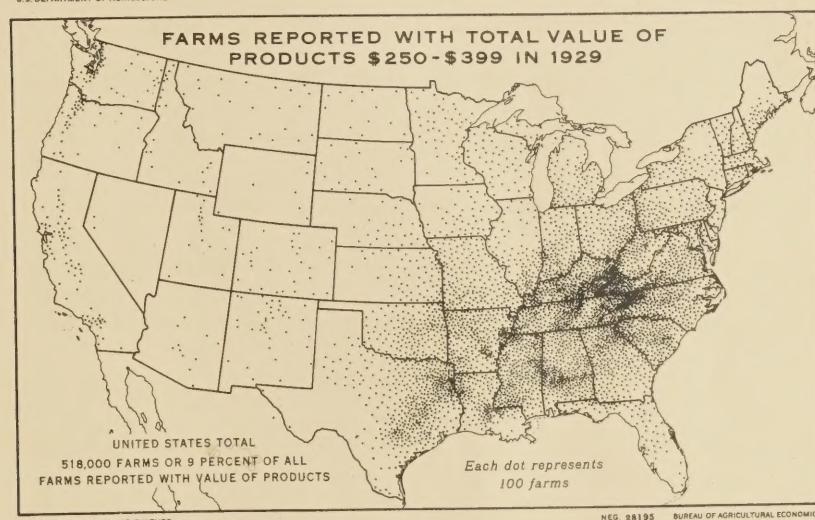
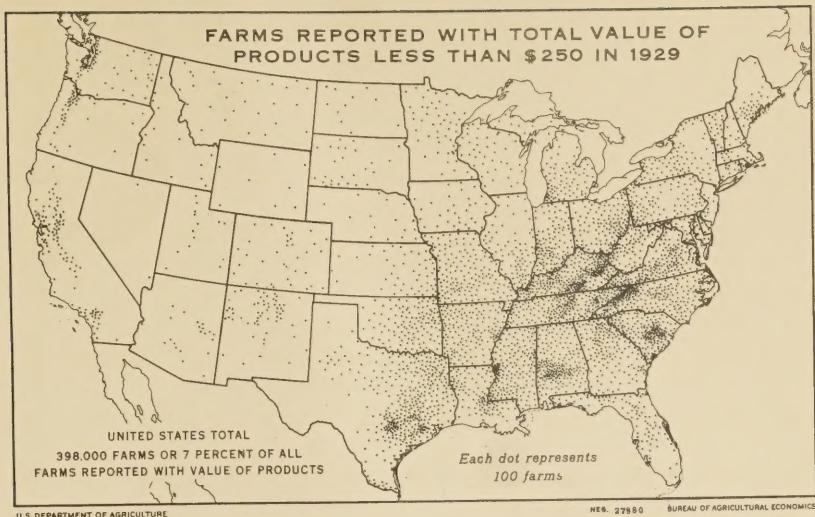
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None of the farms located on the map on the preceding page received as much as \$600, and more than half of them (900,000) had less than \$400 for the year 1929.

The two maps at the top and center of the opposite page show the location and number of farms of still lower income -- the one at the top, the 398,000 farms with less than \$250 gross income, and the one in the center, the 518,000 farms with from \$250 to \$399 gross farm income in 1929. The map at the bottom of the page shows the location of the 766,000 farms with gross income between \$400 and \$599.

Every State in the country had some of these low income farms, even some of the lowest (less than \$250), but their concentration in the Appalachian Highlands and the eastern Cotton Belt is apparent in all cases. These are areas of high birth rates and large families. The same is true of practically all areas of minor concentration, such as the Indian-Spanish-American area of the Southwest, the Ozark mountain region, and northern New England.



People on Poor Lands

There are more than one-half million farms in the United States located on land that is so poor that it is impossible for the families living on this land to make a living by farming it, no matter how hard they try. The figure on the opposite page shows the location of this land.

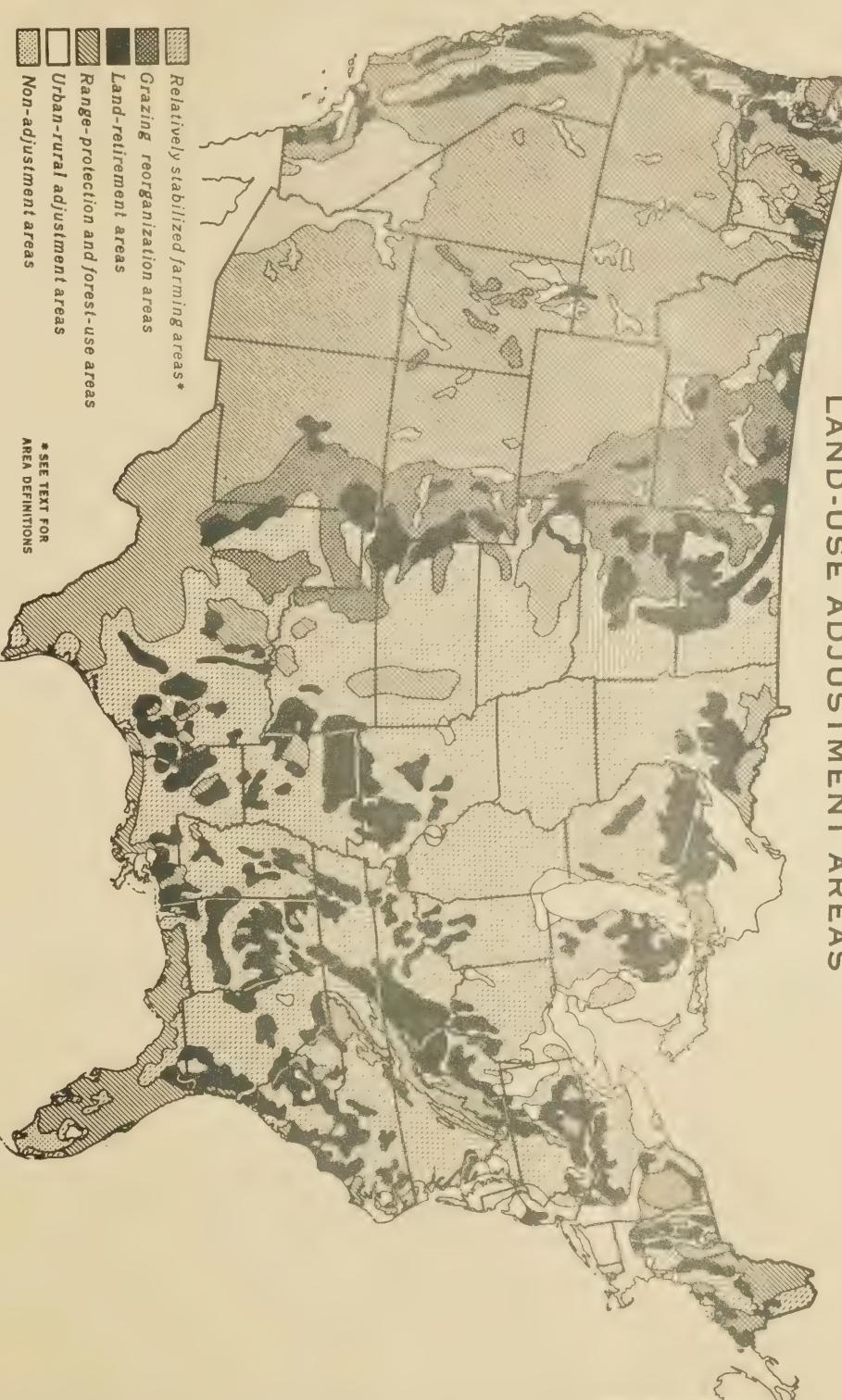
Most of this land should never have been converted from timber and grass culture into more intensive farming; some of it should never have been settled at all, but now that it is in farming, somewhere between 500,000 and 600,000 farm families, and at least 2,500,000 persons' lives are handicapped by the lack of adequate natural physical resources.

As will be shown later, many of these poor land areas have high birth rates and low levels of living. They constitute some of the rural slum areas of the Nation. Furthermore, they are the areas in which population increased more rapidly during the depression, due to a slackened urbanward migration and an actual back-to-the-land movement into some of the most poverty stricken areas.

In some semi-arid sections, where correct land-use adjustment has not yet been accomplished, thousands of families, after two or three generations of settlement, are still living in sod houses or modified dug-outs. Population is so sparse that roads, schools, and churches, as well as other social institutions, are inadequate, so that school terms are sometimes shortened to less than 100 days per year, and many schools, because of the lack of tax evaluations and scarcity of pupils, are able to operate only because they receive income from sources outside of the districts.

Nowhere in rural America, except among the sharecroppers of the Cotton Belt, are so many poor and inadequate farm houses found as in some of the poor-land areas. In some of the mountain sections, thousands of farm families are living in houses no better than those constructed by their forefathers who first settled in these localities as pioneer semi-farmers, semi-hunters. The average value of farm dwellings in the five States of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas is under \$500, and the average for the fourteen Southern States, including West Virginia but excluding Maryland, was only \$632 in 1930.

LAND-USE ADJUSTMENT AREAS



Farm Tenants

There were 2,865,000 tenant-operated farms in the United States in 1935, and this number has probably been increased by this time to three million. The farm families living on these farms have approximately 13 million people in them.

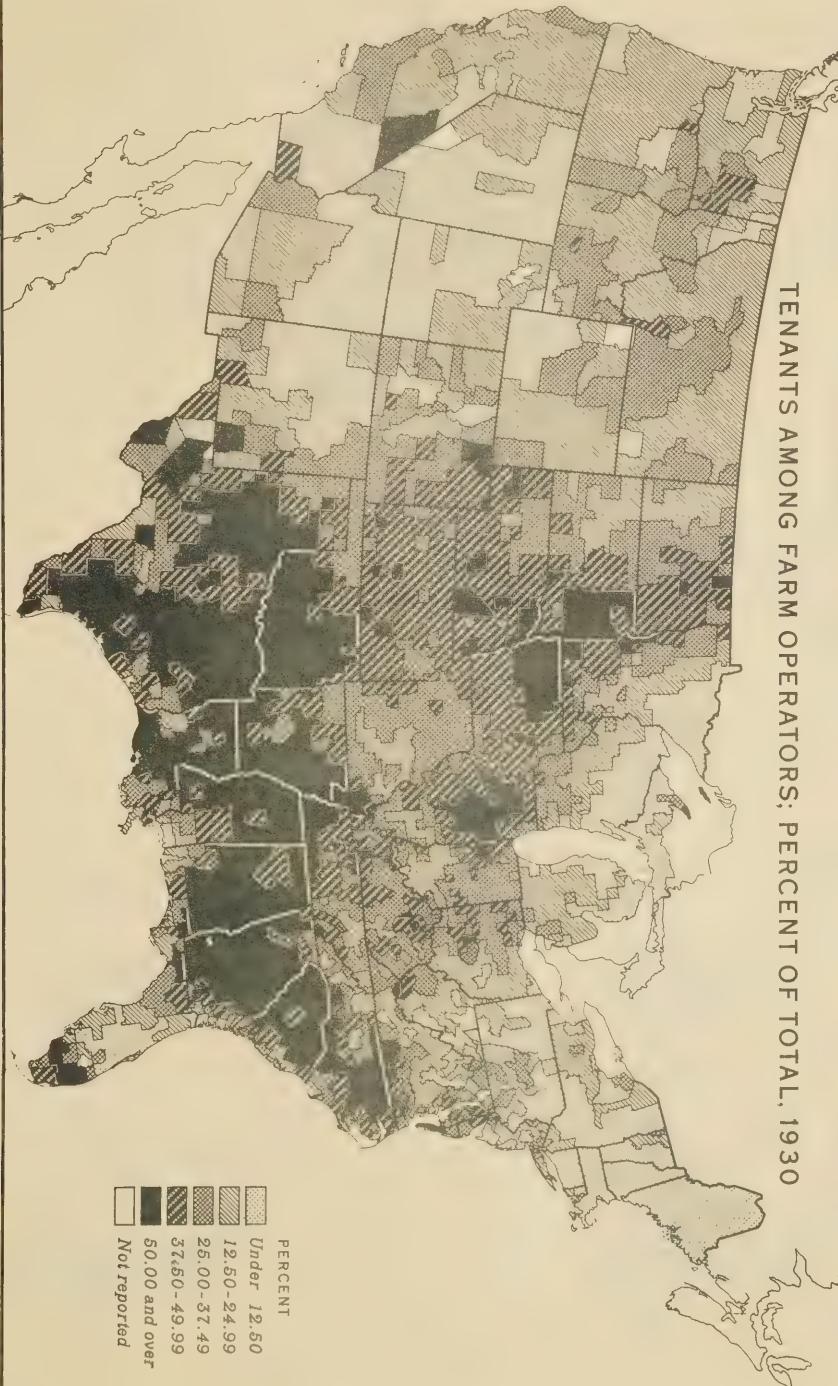
Not all farm tenant families are disadvantaged or poverty stricken, but the 776,000 sharecroppers, together with the farm laborers, occupy the lowest rung on the agricultural ladder and do tend to create rural slum areas wherever they are highly concentrated.

At its best, tenant status is a normal rung on the ladder from farm labor to farm ownership; at its worst, tenancy forces family living standards below levels of decency, develops rural slums, and breeds poverty, illiteracy, and disease. Tenant houses are seldom equipped with running water, electricity, bathrooms, or indoor toilets. The poorer tenant families' food is simple, lacks variety, and often lacks some of the essentials of good nutrition. Their clothing, in a great many cases, is inadequate for the mere protection of the body, much less does it provide any sense of satisfaction. More serious still is the gradual development of an inferior status that comes to a segment of the people living for a few generations under persistent economic and social handicaps.

Once tenancy as a mark of social status has fastened itself on a large percentage of the farm population in a specific area, it carries with it all of the institutional and cultural disadvantages of communities that have in their midst a recognized inferior group. Sooner or later, it also results in either a loss of desire on the part of disadvantaged persons to attain social well-being or in a tendency to escape from perpetual handicaps by organized, direct, and sometimes violent action.

The number of farm tenant families has increased steadily since 1880, and the areas of marked concentration of tenants is shown graphically in the figure on the opposite page. From this figure, it can readily be seen that there are great areas of the Nation in which more than 50 percent of all farms are operated by non-owners.

TENANTS AMONG FARM OPERATORS; PERCENT OF TOTAL, 1930

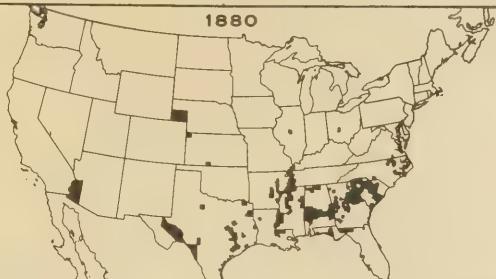


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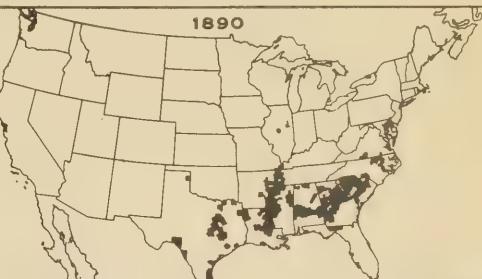
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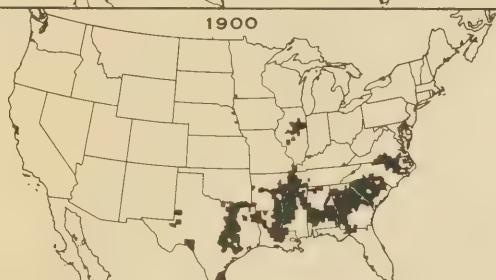
COUNTIES IN WHICH AT LEAST HALF OF THE FARMS WERE OPERATED BY
TENANTS AND CROPPERS, 1880, 1890, 1900, AND 1910



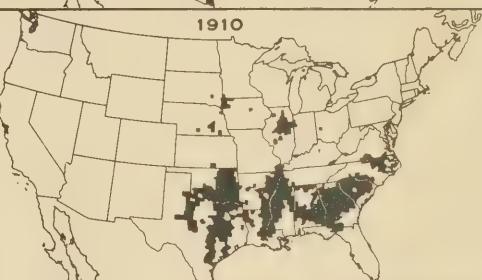
1880



1890



1900

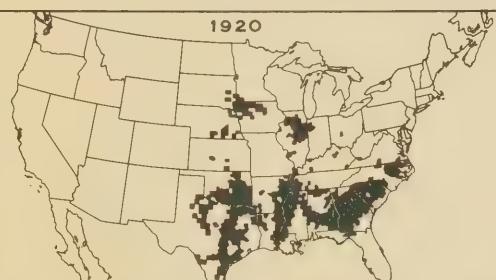


1910

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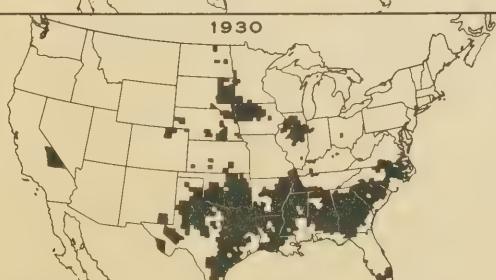
COUNTIES IN WHICH AT LEAST HALF OF THE FARMS WERE OPERATED BY
TENANTS AND CROPPERS, 1920, 1925, 1930, AND 1935



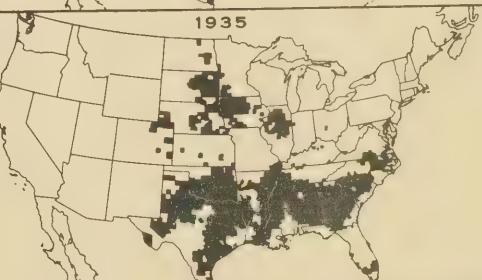
1920



1925



1930



1935

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Farm Laborers

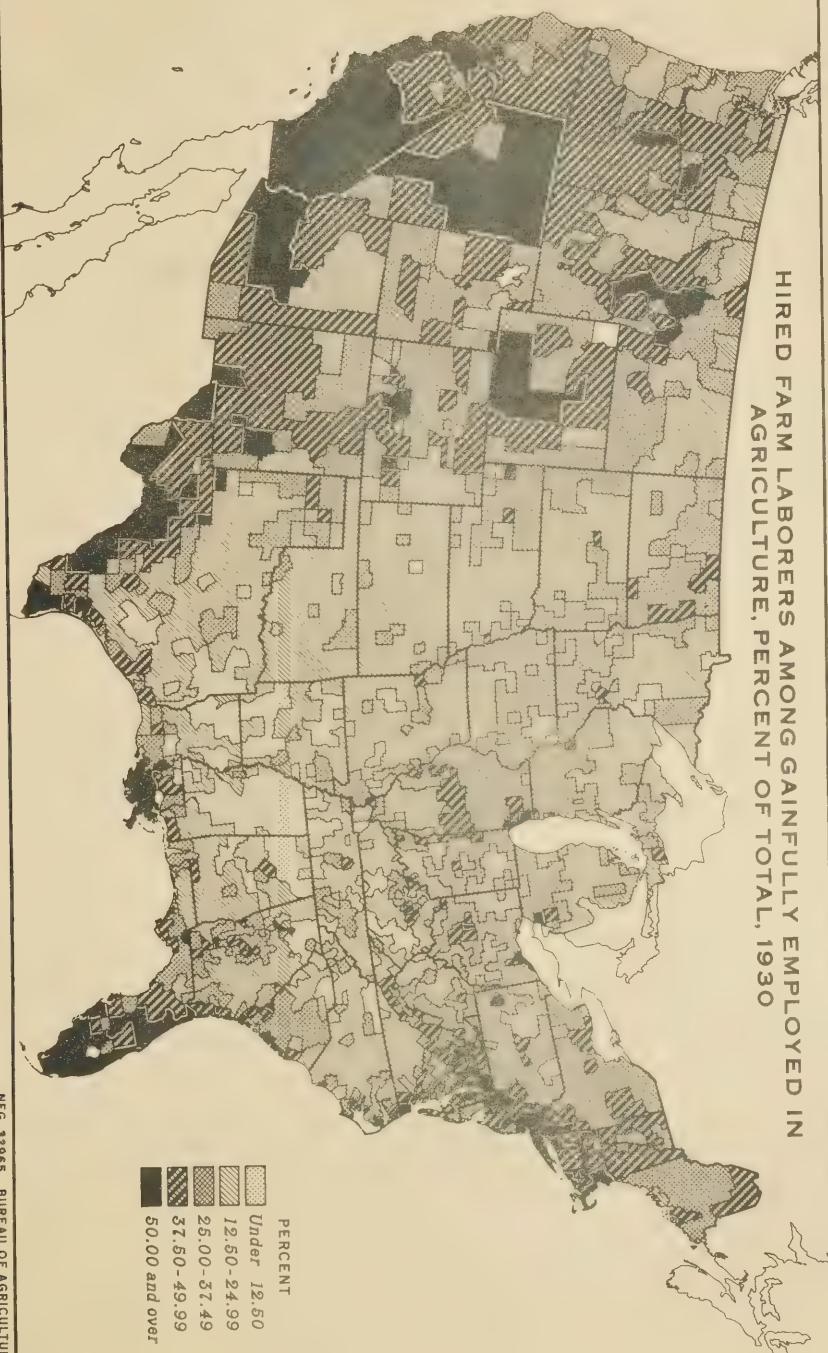
Farm laborers occupy the lowest rung on the agricultural ladder. As a matter of fact, many of them are not on the agricultural ladder at all in the sense of making progress upward toward farm ownership. There are nearly five million of them in the United States, and if to their group are added the sharecroppers, who in their dominant characteristics are mere laborers, the number rises to more than five and one-half million.

Under the most favorable circumstances, the farm laborer may be the son of a neighboring farmer who is working for wages during a short period of his life before he definitely moves into the status of farm tenant or owner-operator. Under the most unfavorable circumstances, he is a migratory worker traveling over long distances seeking piecework and dragging his family with him from one farm labor camp to another. Unfortunately, those included in this latter group have apparently increased rapidly in number during the last decade.

Farm laborers are located in every agricultural area of the Nation. As can be seen from the map, however, they are heavily concentrated on the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf Coasts. If sharecroppers are counted as farm laborers, concentration would also be marked throughout the whole Cotton Belt.

At least 50 percent of all farm laborers are seasonal workers, and probably 300,000 of them are migratory laborers. They are not, for the most part, located in the poor land areas of the Nation; many of them, in fact, are in the more prosperous farming areas. In some instances, as in California, they appear in great numbers in areas of the highest rural standards of living, although the best evidences show that they do not participate in these high standards.

HIRED FARM LABORERS AMONG GAINFULLY EMPLOYED IN
AGRICULTURE, PERCENT OF TOTAL, 1930



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Farm Families on Relief

Until the economic crash of ten years ago, "farmers on relief" was an anomaly in America. The explanation of this phenomenon is not to be found solely in the fact that there had come into existence a federal relief program blanketing all sections and classes of the Nation in distress. It is partly due to a situation that prevails in agriculture and that has not been duplicated at any previous time in our history. Earlier depressions came when there were still free lands in the West and while farmers were still following, to a considerable extent, a self-sufficing type of farming. Now agriculture is highly mechanized, markets are restricted, and the outlook for urban employment is not promising.

There have always been many poor people living on American farms. When the depression came on and deepened, more and more of the borderline families fell below the poverty line, until in February, 1935, the number of farm families on relief or rehabilitation was more than one million. At some time during the last seven years, more than one out of every four rural families in the United States has been assisted by either the Works Progress Administration or the Farm Security Administration.

Relief clients in the farm population are not primarily young, unattached individuals, but are predominantly men and women with children or aged people dependent on them. In many areas of the country, they are suffering from conditions that are beyond their control, and the relief rolls have contained owners as well as tenants, croppers, and laborers.

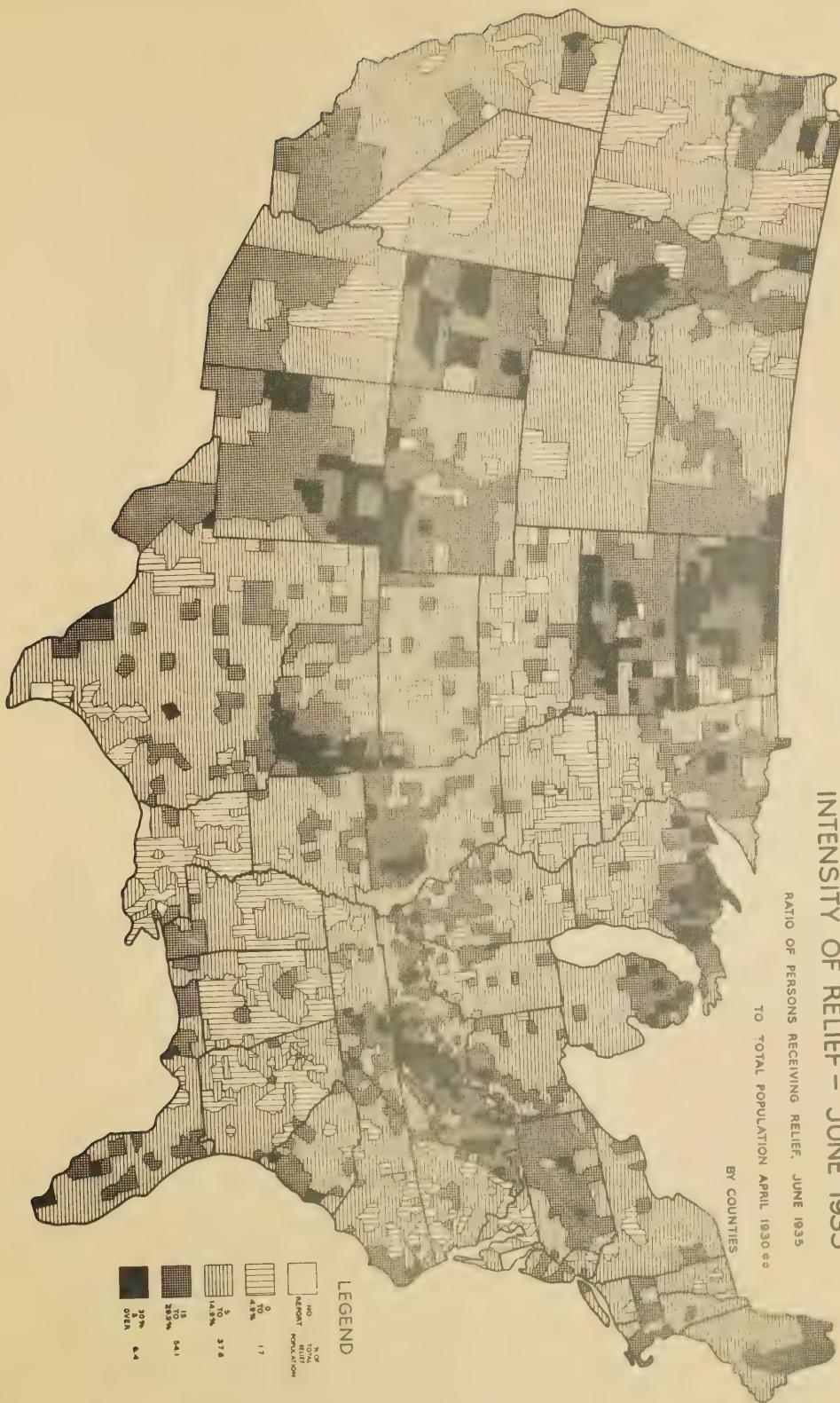
Relief has been necessary in every section of the Nation, but there has been more need in some sections than in others. The percentage of all persons receiving relief has been highest in four distinct areas: the Appalachian-Ozark Highlands, the Cut-Over sections of the Great Lakes States, the Dakotas and eastern Montana, and in the Southwest. By and large, these areas of heavy relief have been the typical poverty areas represented in the maps showing the location of poor lands, low income, tenants and laborers, but they were of course greatly influenced also by a series of droughts in the Great Plains.

It is true, of course, that relief was established and has been administered to meet an emergency, but it is also true that emergencies developed chiefly in those spots in agriculture that were and are chronically weak. The farm relief families have not, for the most part, been newcomers to relief areas. They have been people who were living and working under chronic and basic disadvantaging conditions in these areas before the depression.

INTENSITY OF RELIEF - JUNE 1935

RATIO OF PERSONS RECEIVING RELIEF, JUNE 1935
TO TOTAL POPULATION, APRIL 1930 $\frac{\text{per cent}}{\text{per cent}}$

BY COUNTIES



Unemployment in Agriculture

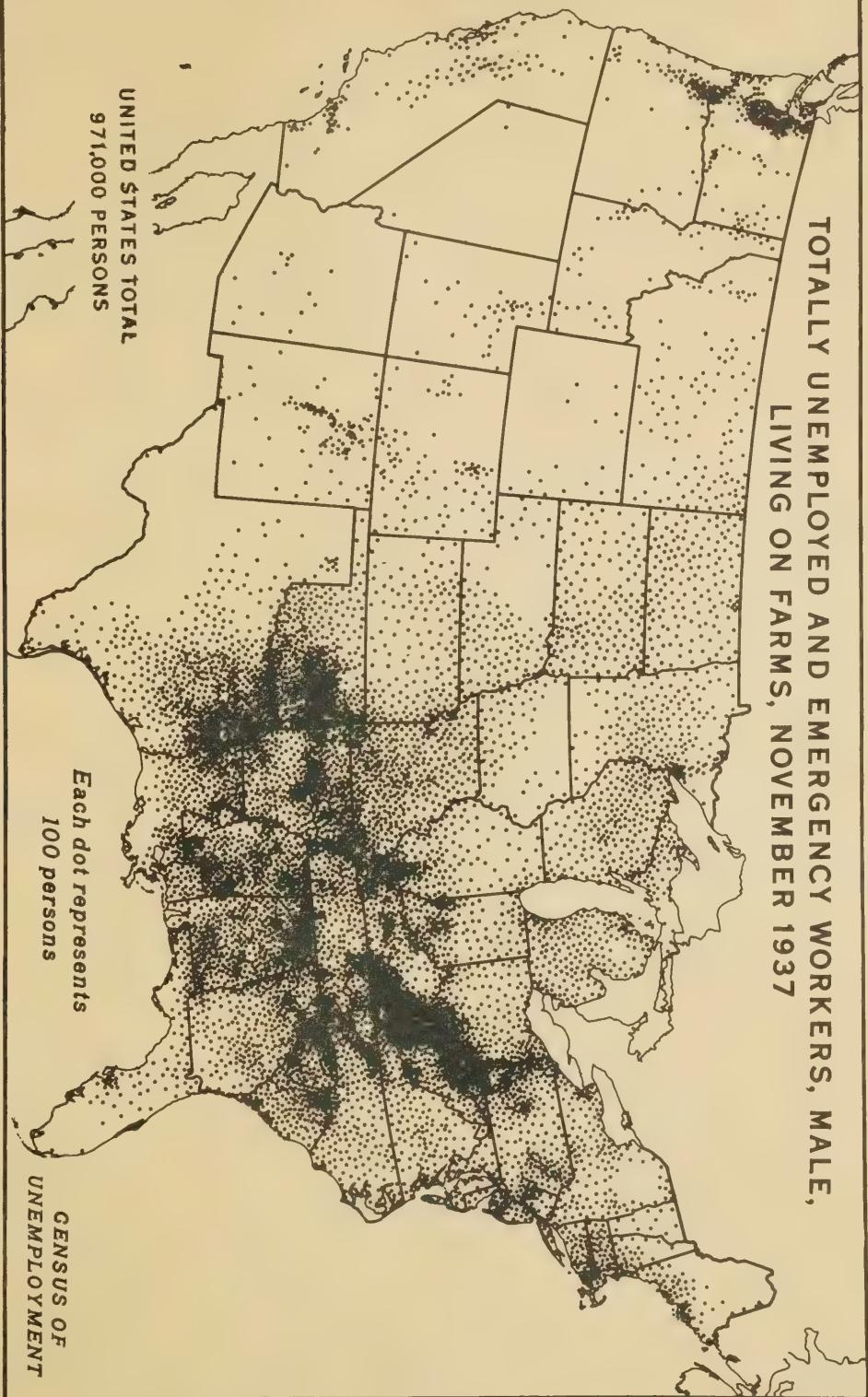
"Unemployment in agriculture" is almost as great an anomaly as farm families on relief, not that farmers have universally been effectively employed, but because farming in the past has been relatively self-sufficient and because we have quite habitually counted as unemployed only those who normally work for cash wages. There were, however, according to the 1937 Unemployment Census 1,517,000 males living on farms who were either totally or partially unemployed or who had only emergency employment.

Of this number, 576,000 were partially unemployed and 266,000 were employed in emergency public works - WPA, CCC, NYA, etc. -; the remaining 705,000 were totally unemployed. The following 2 maps show the geographic location of these totally unemployed and emergency workers in 1937 and of the partly employed persons living on farms.

Unemployment on farms is not due entirely to the depression, but in part to a combination of long-time trends. The proportion of total gainfully employed in the Nation who were engaged in farming declined at an almost constant rate from 1870 to 1930. During this whole period, however, there was an almost constant increase in non-farm employment, created by expanding industrial and commercial development. The result was that those not needed for farm work migrated to towns and cities. This net migration was approximately 6,000,000 during the decade of the twenties. The gross migration was from 500,000 to 1,100,000 for each year from 1922 to 1926. During 1932, however, there was a back-to-the-land movement, and since that time, urbanward migration has failed to absorb the excess farm population of working age.

Unless net migration to the cities from farms is to develop in great volume or new opportunities for employment are developed in agriculture, the problem of unemployment in the farm population will grow steadily worse, because of the ever-increasing percentage of the farm population in the working age groups. As will be shown a little later, there will probably be 23 percent more of the farm population between the ages of 15 and 65 in 1960 than there is in 1940.

TOTALLY UNEMPLOYED AND EMERGENCY WORKERS, MALE,
LIVING ON FARMS, NOVEMBER 1937

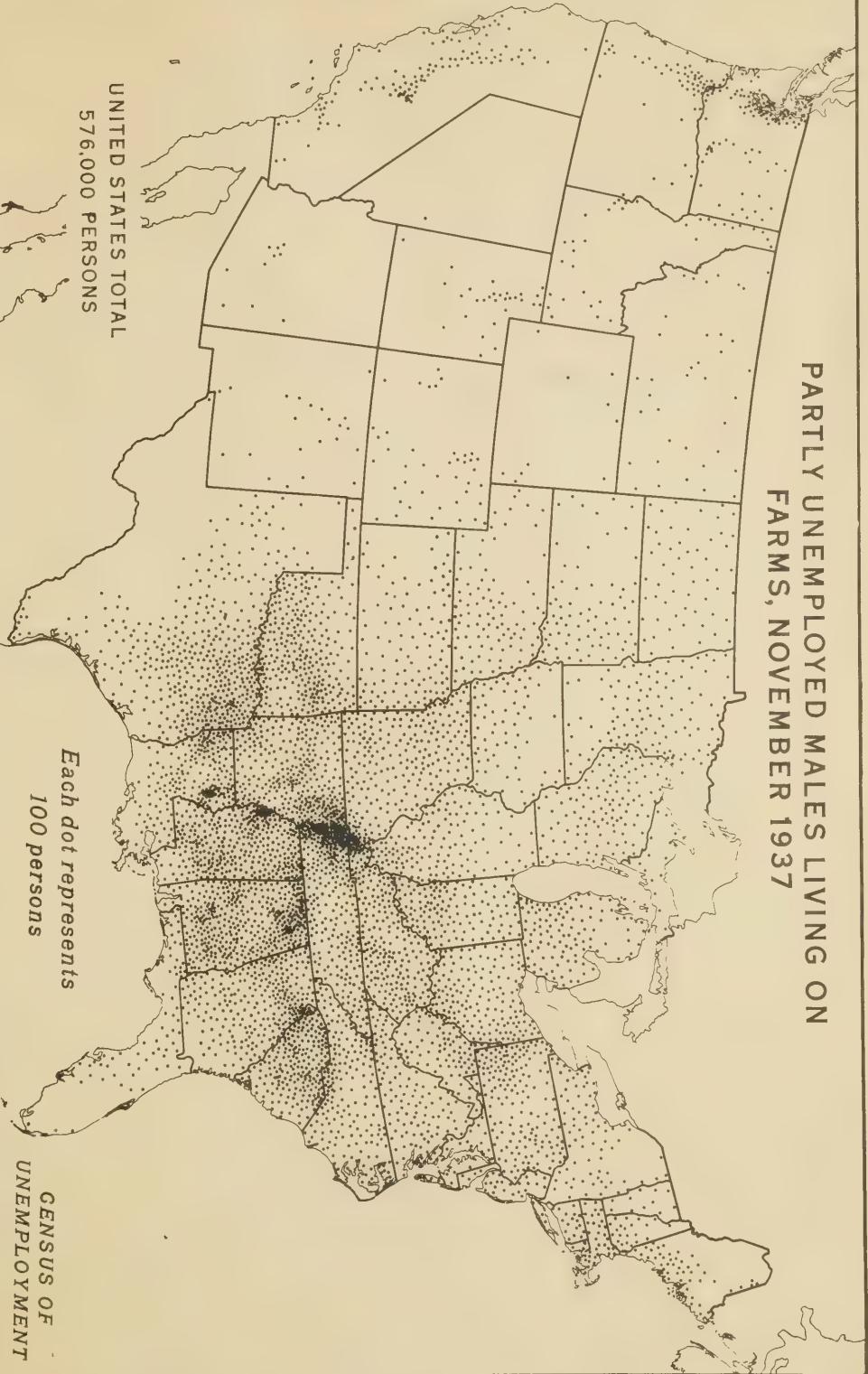


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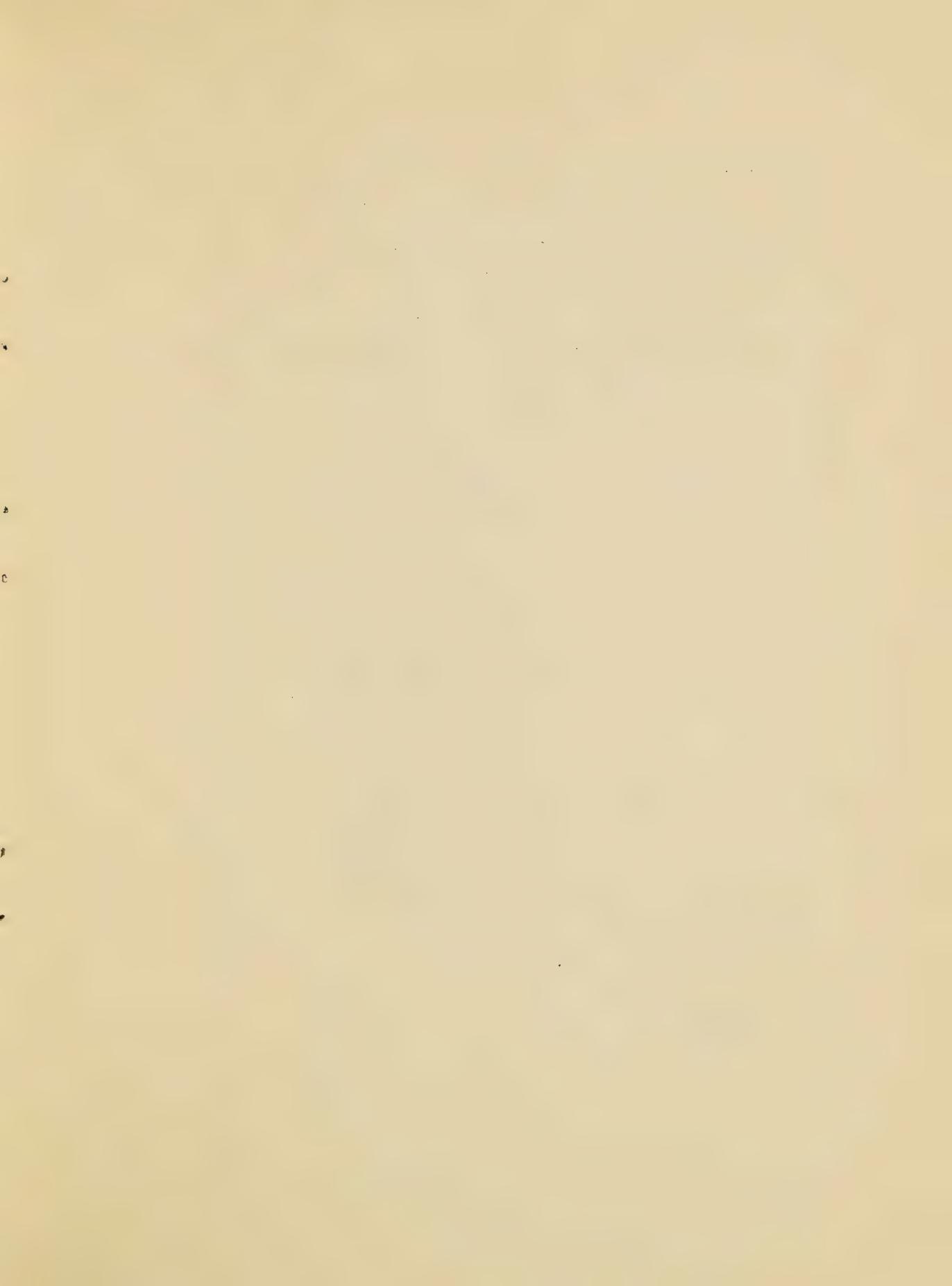
PARTLY UNEMPLOYED MALES LIVING ON
F FARMS, NOVEMBER 1937



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Migrating Farm Families

For generations, the people of this country have moved about in search of what they believed or hoped were better economic or cultural advantages. For over one hundred years they moved in great volume westward across the continent. For the last fifty years, they have been moving in great numbers from farms to towns and cities. During the depression, this cityward movement slackened and there was, for a time, an actual back-to-the-land movement.

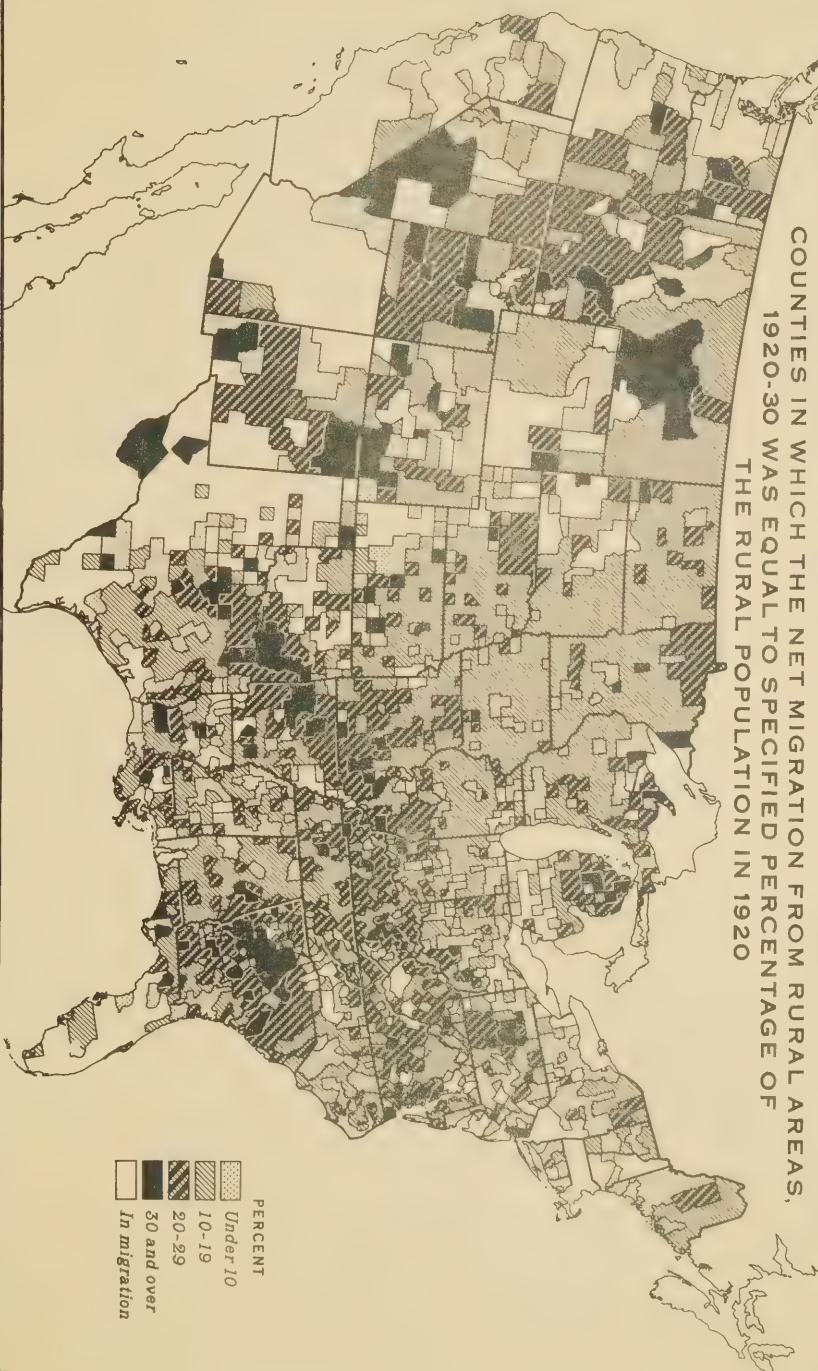
The map shows the migration to and from farms for the decade 1920 to 1930. It was during at least the first half of this decade that there was quite a marked disparity between relative prosperity in urban areas and the lack of it in agriculture. This stimulated a tremendous net migration from farms to cities, reaching its highest peak in the five-year period 1922 to 1926, during which period there was a net movement from farms of 3,480,000.

While this movement from the farm slackened after 1926, population still left the land in fairly great numbers for the next five years. It is calculated that there were approximately 6,000,000 more persons who left farms for towns and cities during the decade than there were who flowed in the opposite direction.

The migration away from farms was, for the most part, from areas in which population pressure on the natural resources was most pronounced. Sixty percent of it was from the South. The severest losses occurred in South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Texas, each of which lost more than 300,000 persons during the decade.

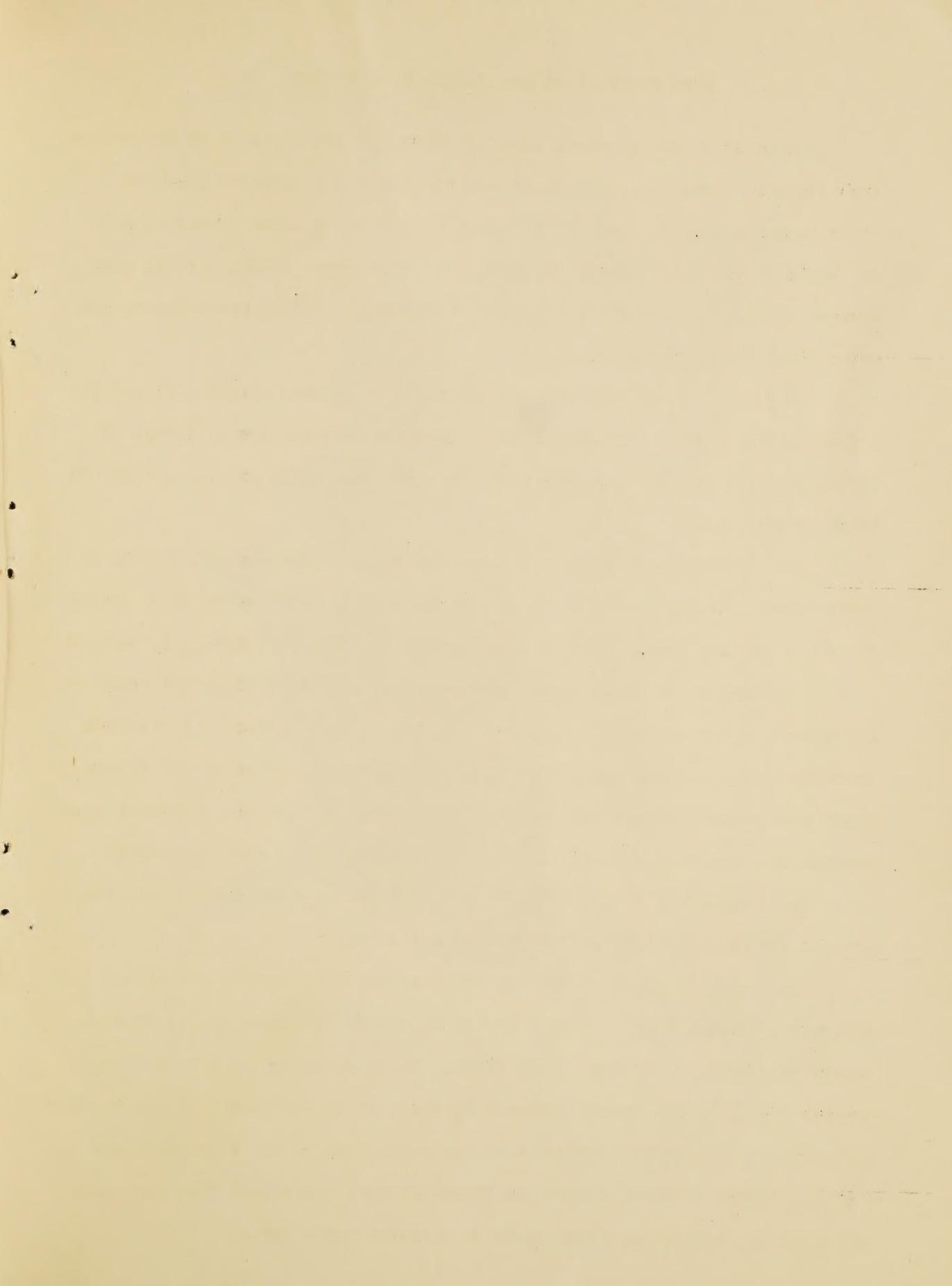
Migrants from farms to cities generally went from areas of lesser to areas of greater opportunity. Manufacturing centers offered numerous opportunities. One hundred sixty-seven counties in which manufacturing is predominant received almost three-fourths as many migrants as left farms. Three major cities - New York, Chicago, and Detroit - with their immediately surrounding territory, account for one-fourth, and the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, with more than one million in-migrants from other parts of the country, alone received one-sixth.

COUNTIES IN WHICH THE NET MIGRATION FROM RURAL AREAS,
1920-30 WAS EQUAL TO SPECIFIED PERCENTAGE OF
THE RURAL POPULATION IN 1920



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Farm Families on Low Standards of Living

An index of the physical level of living of the families of the Nation probably more nearly reflects their general economic well-being than any other measurement. The map on the opposite page is an index constructed on the basis of the only factors available on a nationwide basis, namely, percentage of farm homes with electricity, telephones, radios, automobiles, and water piped to the dwelling.

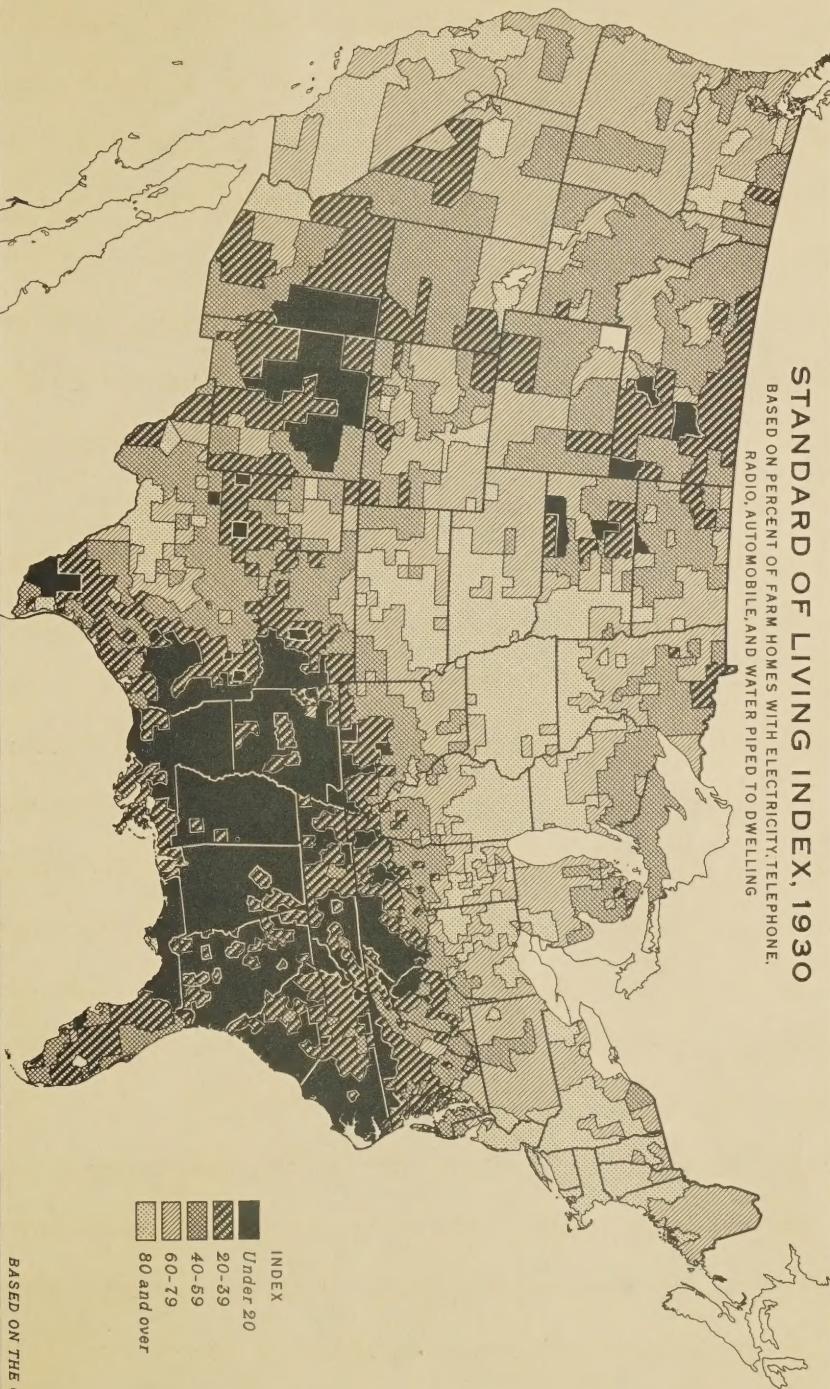
It is easy to see how the influence of low income, poor lands, and the sharecropping type of tenancy reflect themselves in low material levels of living among farm families. The areas in which these factors are present are black on the map.

Any fundamentally disadvantaging factor that operates consistently in agriculture is sure, in due time, to reflect itself in the standard of living of the people who farm. This is true whether the factor is physical, such as poor or eroding soils or recurrent droughts, whether it is financial, such as low income or bad economic arrangements in relation to tenants and laborers, or whether it is social and cultural, represented by ineffective and inefficient social institutions and organizations. When two or more disadvantaging factors are operating or conditions are prevailing over a wide geographic area, the standard of living of large segments of the population within the area is almost certain to fall to a very low level.

The rural slums of the Nation exist in the geographic areas of the Nation represented by the black spots on this map. In these areas, approximately one-third of our farm people live. These areas were not reduced to poverty solely by the recent depression, although it was here that the greatest percentage of the people succumbed to the conditions of the depression and felt the impact of these conditions first and most severely. They have been and still are the chronic weak spots in American rural life.

STANDARD OF LIVING INDEX, 1930

BASED ON PERCENT OF FARM HOMES WITH ELECTRICITY, TELEPHONE,
RADIO, AUTOMOBILE, AND WATER PIPED TO DWELLING



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BASED ON THE CENSUS
BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

